



SOCIO-ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION IN BAMA'S KARUKKU AND MIRIAM TILALI'S MURIEL AT METROPOLITAN

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Most of the writing of the blacks in South Africa and Dalits in India falls into the genre of resistance literature. They contain an analysis of social problems like Racism, Castism, Inequality, Repression, and Exploitation. Thus, the writings of Bama and Miriam Tlali become a verbal exposure of the human document to help society to transform and transcribe its ways. In their crusade for social justice, they not only portray their hopes and aspirations, but also their fight for survival. An obvious documentation of the marginalized in the writings of Bama and Tlali about the Socio economic status of Dalits and Blacks brings out the enigma of depravity and exploitation in terms of shelter, religion, land ownership, education, and employment. Though they are aborigines, they still lack the basic necessities such as food and shelter. This paper reveals that the decentralization of Indian Dalits and the South African Blacks has social, political, and economic challenges that they face in their day to day survival. It also focuses on how Dalits and Blacks are thrown into the bottom of the mainstream society and how they suffer from economic depravity.

Bama and Miriam Tlali realistically portray the plight of the poor as against the luxurious and aristocratic life of the rich. The portrayal shows how racial oppression and oppression in the name of caste lead to the economic deprivation of the oppressed. In Bama's novels the despicable conditions of the poverty-stricken Dalits who work in the farms on the higher caste *Nayaikars* and the way they are swindled and cheated by the upper caste traders are portrayed in a vivid manner. It is a shame that the higher caste stoop so low to perpetrate such cruel exploitations on these poor Dalits. The Dalits are forced to work in the fields to eke out a living. They toil hard to earn their daily bread. They work from dawn to dusk and get the wages just to fill their stomachs. They do not enjoy any other comfort in their lives. The plight of the Dalit women is still worse. They work along with their menfolk and get a lesser pay because of the rampant gender discrimination. They are doubly oppressed because they work as domestics in the households of the higher caste besides working in the fields. They continue to work at home when they return from the fields, look after the children and their husband and finally give themselves away to satisfy the physical needs of their husbands too. There is a life of untold misery and not a day passes without such humiliation.

Racial oppression of blacks leads to the economic deprivation of the oppressed. Unlike Bama, Tlali has very lesser account of blacks' economical exploitation that has pervaded in her works. Almost all the works of Bama are influenced by the rural areas and her protagonists are directly affected by the economic exploitation by their landlords. But Tlali has completely compiled her whole experiences from the urban areas. In the industrialised, the subjugated and low-cost labours are exploited an indirect way. So, Tlali has concentrated on the awareness rather than on portraying the pathetic condition of blacks' economical exploitation.

Bama is a celebrated Dalit woman writer in Tamil whose works have been translated into English, French, and several other regional languages. Born as Faustina Mary Fatima Rani in the village Puthupatty, near Madurai in Tamil Nadu in 1958, she accepted the pen name "Bama." She did her schooling in her village and completed her degree at St. Mary's College, Tutukudi. After taking B.Ed, Bama started working as a teacher. Her life took a turn when she took the vows to become a nun. This was an attempt to break away from caste bonds and pursue her goals to help poor Dalit girls. She expected that she could work with the poor Dalits and create awareness among them, but unfortunately she was shocked to find that her desire could not be fulfilled as she was posted in a convent in North India. After seven years, Bama left the seminary and protested against the discrimination in the church meted out to Dalit Christians. After a period of disappointment and disillusionment, Bama slowly dispensed such thoughts and began to gain strength to defend herself and her community in positive terms. She is indebted to Rev. Fr. Mark S.J and Fr. M. Jeyaraj who encouraged her to write and gave moral support so that she could build self-confidence and self-respect. Presently, she is working as a school teacher at Uthirameur, near Kancheepuram.

A translator and essayist K. Srilata, in her review, says that reading Bama's autobiography *Karukku* is an intense experience. She brings out the edges of serrated polymer that snatches the feelings from blood. *Karukku* remains as a cherished

masterpiece of Dalit women writing, and it forces the reader to sit up and pay attention to the texture of the narrator's life, a texture that is startlingly different from that of urban, middle-class, and upper-class life. Bama's grandmother Mariamma is the protagonist of *Karukku*; she looks after the chores in a *Nayaikar's* house and she is given the left over as the daily wages:

As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the *Nayaikar's* house, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and then bring home the left over rice and curry from the previous evening. And for some reason she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods. (K 14)

Right from her childhood, Bama has seen the people of her community working incessantly and surviving only on hard labour. She gives a detailed description of the works of various kinds undertaken by the Dalits in her village. In the agricultural sector, they take up ploughing, manuring, watering, sowing the seeds, separating the seedlings and plating them and then weeding out, spraying fertilizers, reaping the grains, and working on the threshing floors, plating groundnuts, and selecting ripe coconuts. Apart from the work in these fields, they also work in construction sites, daggering wells, carrying loads of earth, gravel, and stone. When these works are not available, they go to the forests and the hills to gather firewood or they work with palm-leaves or at the kilns making bricks. By and large, these people have to work in order to spin some money out to fend for themselves. When the men folk is arrested and taken into custody during some communal riot or other, the women folk bear the double burden of working in the fields and face lots of hardships to carry food to those men who are in hiding fearing the police. They live in a miserable condition during these turbulent days.

Most of the people in the Dalit colony are agricultural labourers. They are all employed on the farms of the higher castes; when there is no work, they go to the nearby forests and collect firewood and sell them to get some gruel for the night. The high caste people face no such problem as they have wells in their farm and electric motors to pump water. So they have to work during all the seasons. And they need not suffer like the poor Dalits. Throughout the year they live in comforts as these Dalits are their disposal to work for them round the clock. The working conditions of the Dalits are portrayed very realistically by Bama in *Karukku*. In the *Nayaikars* farms the Dalits work like animals that are muzzled in the threshing field. The animals are muzzled from eating the straw while is threshing them. The same way, the Dalit farmers are also muzzled invisibly because they should not raise voice against the upper caste and they have to accept whatever wages they offer for their hard labour. They are exploited cruelly and treated in an inhuman manner. The older women who cannot do the work in the fields live wretchedly working as domestics in the *Nayaikars* house and carry out the errands obediently.

In *Karukku*, Bama's grandmother is shown as a sincere and obedient servant in a *Nayaikar* family. She is also employed to hire labours to work on their farms. She works all the days except on Sundays. Every day, she gets up early morning; finishes her own house chores and goes to the *Nayaikar's* house to work till sunset. When she comes back at night, she prepares some gruel for her. Sometimes, they get some seasonal occupation in the fields. All the women and children go to the fields to pull up the groundnut crops and clean and separate the pods. They wake up early in the morning and leave for the fields carrying some gruel which they drink during the midday break. They work in the fields till evening. At the end of the day, they carry the pods to the granaries of the *Nayaikar's* after all the day's labour they get a meagre amount as their wages. Sometimes, they are paid in kind and sell the groundnuts to the local traders and buy from them some rice or broken grains. The gruel made out of these grains emits a bad smell because of the poor quality of the rice. The trader is generally cheats these poor labours and mints a lot of money. Once the season is over, they start working in breaking the groundnut pods. They have to do the job very carefully, but very fast. No one is allowed to crack the nuts, and if they do so it entails serious punishment. They heap all sorts of abuses on those poor labours. The labourers also use their teeth to break the groundnuts and in the process, they get choked because of the dust. At the end of the day, once again, they get a meagre wage.

As stated earlier, when they have no other work, they go to nearby forests and

mountains to collect firewood. They sell the firewood and from the proceeds they get some cheap quality rice to prepare some gruel at home. Bama recounts how, one day, her mother after working laboriously the whole day in the mountains and forests comes home tired, carrying a big bundle of firewood. The moment she reaches the hut, she leans on the wall and starts vomiting gobs of blood. Describing this wretched condition, Bama says: "But it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood that people of my community could even survive" (K 40).

Another deplorable scene in *Karukku* is that, during the harvest time, women and children go to the streets and the pathways to sweep and gather the fallen grains from the sheaves taken to the threshing floors. They toil very hard to pick up these scattered grains and finally collect them in a basket to take it home. Then, they sell the grains to the traders who take them in exchange for tapioca or some other goods swindling them in the batter. They also work in the cotton fields and collect cotton pods as wages. All the collected cotton bundles are taken by the traders for a very cheap price. Banking on these poor farmers' innocence, the traders thrive in their business. Describing the hapless condition of these labourers, Bama writes:

Our hard work was exploited half the time by our *Nayai* employers. The rest of the time we were swindled by these tradesmen. So how was it possible for us to make any progress? It seems that it is only the swindlers who manage to advance themselves. But there is no way at all for the dalit who strikes to fair methods, and who toils hard all her life to make good. (K 46)

And at the end, Bama pathetically says that this is the community, which is born to work, and however hard they toil, they have to live on the same gruel every day: "Only at night do they take a rest and they have to keep working until the moment of death. It is only in this way that they can even half fill their bellies" (K 47). Bama, after becoming a nun, is posted in a school to work as a teacher. There, she is pained to see her community people working in a despicable manner. They are given menial jobs like sweeping the premises, swabbing, and washing the classrooms, and cleaning the lavatories. They never treated the poor people as human beings.

Bama also gives vivid details about how the Dalits get only very cheap variety of fish and other fish products. They cannot afford to go for better varieties like the higher caste people who feast on costly seafood like prawns. Another important thing in these poor labours' life style is that only on occasions like Christmas, New Year, Easter, and the Annual feast do they prepare some good at home. They are usually excited about these celebrations and they enjoy only on beef on these occasions. Otherwise, they usually live on rice and curry and that too only in the evening. Often they have gruel along with some raw onions, green chillies or some stale ground nuts. When they have money, they buy small packets of pickles sold by the vendors. She also portrays clearly the difficulties and struggles that all poor Dalits experience. Whether it is the scorching heat or the incessant rains, the Dalits are forced to toil painfully and continue to live in their huts with gruel and water. She concludes:

Life is difficult if you happen to be poor, even though you are born into the upper-castes. When this is the case, the conditions of those who are born into the paraya community, as the poorest of the poor, struggling for daily survival, doesn't need spelling out. (K 68)

Deirdre Byrne, in her article "A different kind of resistance: an overview of South African black women's writing" says that Tlali's fiction is read as "writing as a means of self-expression under the burden of socio economic difficulties" (22). Her writing is often neglected because South African culture is thought to be inferior to that of the metropolis. The analysis of Tlali's fiction are perforce cursory owing to the large number of texts under review in this article, and the main thrust appears to be the figuring of her work as protest literature. The argument is cogent and in her opinion the focus on these texts is legitimate. She also comments that Tlali's fiction reveals the question of the political, social or cultural value of creative writing.

Like Bama, Miriam Tlali is the first black woman to have published a novel in South Africa and the only woman novelist to have emerged from the black townships during the 1970s, the period of protest literature in South Africa. Miriam Masoli Tlali was born in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, in 1933. She was educated at St. Cyprian's Anglican School and Madibane High School in Western Native Township. She registered for a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, with the intention of gaining admission to the faculty of medicine. After two years, however, the apartheid government made it illegal for black students to attend white universities. She was transferred to Roma University in Lesotho, but was forced by financial difficulties to halt her studies. She returned to Johannesburg where she married and had a child. To support her family, she worked as a clerk-typist in a shop that sold furniture and appliances, and her experiences in this position became the material of her first novel, *Muriel at Metropolitan* (1975).

In *Muriel at Metropolitan* there are ironical passages which indicate the economic exploitation besides racial bias. The life spheres of black and white women at this time did not have many interfaces, the editors, blinded by the senti-

mentality of these verses, and are not alerted to their function in the text, their ambiguity, and the irony they evoke. The following verse heads the first chapter of the typescript:

A Message for You

Put all you know in the job you're paid for –

And then with a conscience that's clear –

Turn your attention to things deep and wonderful.

Open the eye and ear. (MM 2)

In the context of Muriel's view, the irony of this verse is obvious: although Muriel has put all her skills into her job, she is not fairly compensated for her work.

Tlali communicates a sense of fulfilment against all odds in her autobiographical novel *Muriel at Metropolitan*. She reconstructs her experiences of working at Metropolitan Radio, a busy electronics store located in central Johannesburg, catering to lower income blacks and whites. The firm is a microcosm of South African urban life with its variety of people and their curious relationships with one another. The protagonist is a black woman, Muriel, whose position as an accounts typist at the store constantly forces her to reflect on her moral commitment to her people. Her inner tension is compounded by the contempt with which her Jewish boss, Mr. Bloch, and other white employees, treat her, and the rest of the black people coming into the store. Tlali illustrates how an employee's race and gender determine not only her salary, but also the kind of gift she receives for Christmas. Muriel's conversation with Mrs. Ludorf, a white co-worker, reveals Mr. Bloch's discriminatory policy of remunerating his employees. After hesitating enquiring about Muriel's standard of education, Mrs. Ludorf asks her: "... How much did your boss give you for Christmas bonus? Nothing, but he gave me a travelling rug worth about eight rands. What, a lousy blanket, after all these years? That's a shame! And you know what he gave them?" (187).

Mr. Bloch's choice of a present for Muriel is significant, for not only does it fulfil the white South African stereotypical association of African women with traditional blankets for adornment, but it also reveals his meanness and his total disrespect for Muriel. Mrs. Ludorf's conversation with Muriel does not result from any genuine concern, but is based upon her white superiority complex, which she derives from the larger socio-political system. Her questions betray her inner desire to retain her privileged position as a white woman over a black woman. They also point to the threat that Muriel poses to her as an efficient and educated black woman. As Muriel notes, Mrs. Ludorf used to comment on her vital statistics and diet as a way of asserting her superiority over Muriel because of her unflattering weight.

Muriel's resigned tone of the above passage confirms her earlier assertion that she does not want to stage a "one woman's protest" against her employer. However, her worst moments of frustration occur, when she has to ask the black customers for their particulars and pass books before she can process their Hire Purchase applications. Muriel expresses her ambiguous feelings:

... Every time I was forced to be loyal to the firm I would get those cramps deep in my entrails. Every time I asked for a black customer's passbook I would feel like a policeman who in this country is a symbol of oppression. I would continue to feel like a traitor, part of a conspiracy, a machine deliberately designed to crush the soul of people. (140)

Tlali's dialogism in this passage reflects Muriel's relationship with other people. Muriel wrestles with her conscience, which forces her into a double voiced discourse with the dissonances engendered by the hostilities towards her social relations. During her meditative moments on her working conditions, Muriel is haunted by a spectre of herself as a policeman, a personified symbol of that level of oppression only a black South African can understand. Her language reveals her consciousness of her oppressive conditions, and also her social relations that enforce those conditions. These conflicts of interest define her socially constructed subjectivity which she experiences out of her mistaken assumption of the guilt, responsibility, and blame for the inefficiencies of the status quo. Her silent conspiracy with the firm's cheating is therefore not done out of sheer ignorance, but is a result of forced "loyalty," even at the expense of a troubled conscience and a deafening pounding of the heart.

The end of the novel portrays Muriel's determination to uphold righteousness, and to reclaim her pride and dignity in the face of the looming threat of financial difficulty. Her resolute decision is captured in the words:

When I took my bag and said to the boss 'Good night, Mr. Bloch' for the last time, I did not know what the future held in store for me. I did not care. I had no regrets. All I knew was that I could not continue to be part of the web that has been woven to entangle the people whom I love and am part of. I would never again place myself in a position in which I had to ask for pass-books or 'be loyal to the firm' at my own people's expense. My conscience would be clear. And I added, as I looked into Mr. Bloch's eyes: 'Thanks for every-

thing.'(190)

As a black worker in apartheid South Africa, she has received a far lower salary than her white counterparts. Forced to exploit her own people, she can never have a "conscience that's clear," and were she to turn her attention finally to things "deep and wonderful," her eye would only meet degradation, and her ears only the political naivety of her white co-workers. The other verse by Patience Strong, "written on that Pitco Tips Tea Card," Muriel says, "which Johan unconcernedly deposited on the desk before me," heads the last chapter "I Quit": "Even though the day holds out no hope of happiness, Don't despise it or despair for you can never guess –What it may unfold before the sunset dies away. Greet with glad thanks of giving the beginning of each Day" (91). When each day entailed waking up to the same hopelessly oppressive political situation, any black in South Africa during the 1960s and the 1970s would have realised the irony intended by this verse. In addition, on this day in the narrative, Muriel has decided to resign her post at Metropolitan Radio. It seems unlikely that a woman, having to give up the relative independence that her work position and her income have given her, with no welfare network to rely on, would "greet with glad thanks giving the beginning" of such a day. Tlali has not only dealt with her works and focuses on how the blacks are affected by the depravities condition of their poverty, but also how they are fully imposed in economical exploitation and cheap labourers.

Muriel's resoluteness is a celebration of her determination to honour her convictions. It endorses her victory over all the political, social, economic, and sexual constraints imposed on her life, and paves way for other women to follow. The whole situation characterizes the text as a site for social and sexual struggles and contests, rather than simple conduits of power. She moves from the position of a victim to that of an individual who believes in her own consciousness, and is empowered to take control of her life. Her voice concludes the text, for Mr. Bloch's voice no longer has any legitimacy at this stage. Once more, that dialectical relation of oppression and resistance emerges as the core character of a South African black woman's experience. Tlali empowers black women by illustrating that they can be at the centre of their lives irrespective of the social relations that collaborate to marginalize them.

Bama and Tlali exercise their inalienable right to freedom of speech and choice of themes through their revolutionary fiction, radically condemning reactionary persecution meted out by opposing authorities and other mainstream critics. Their enforced inferior status as a Dalit and black woman living in India and South Africa under the policy of hegemony, social systems which have created the urgency for her to make a critical examination of her marginalized socio economic reality, analyse its content, and to act upon it by motivating her reading audience to participate in definitive actions that will empower them to transform their degrading conditions into respectable ones. To achieve this, Bama and Tlali have to reaffirm their own identity by continually addressing the imposed varieties of social hierarchies, materialism, and gender biases within her society, vigorously challenging them and replacing them with genuine social equity and justice.

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